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JOE SATRIANI THE WAY TO BLUE SKY HAPPINESS

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JOE SATRIANI

THE WAY TO BLUE SKY HAPPINESS

By Danny McCue

There is no altar to the guitar hero on the grounds of Carle Place High School, on whose track I run every morning. In fact if you talk to most locals, it's former New York Jets great Matt Snell, an alumni, and the girl's field hockey team, regularly state champions, that they point to with pride.

Joe Satriani was a quiet student by all accounts. His high school music teacher, William Wescott, now retired, remembers his soft-spokeness and serious interest in music theory. However no one would've guessed that the kid who gave up football for the guitar the day Jimi Hendrix died would go on to become the school's most acclaimed former student. He did. He still is.

His calling cards are strong melodies and an extraordinary command of the tools of flash, qualities that have made his recorded output: *Not Of This Earth*, the platinum *Surfin' With The Alien*, and its gold successors *Dreaming #11* (an Ep) and *Flying In A Blue Dream* essential to the record collection of anyone serious about rock guitar.

On *The Extremist*, his fifth album and best since *Surfin' With The Alien*, the one-time rock and roll whiz kid of central Nassau County (he now resides in San Francisco) serves up plenty of salvos (the title track, "War" and "Summer Song") amongst surprisingly more tranquil, acoustically-based tracks such as "Rubina's Blue Sky Happiness." Moments of triumph and introspection, it turns out, that say as much about the recording of this album as they do about the artist himself.

Let's start by talking about the road. You never hear any road stories about Joe Satriani.

Wow, well, the *Flying...* tour in 1990 was the biggest tour we had ever done. It was the kind of tour where we played in front of the most people and we progressed right up to our limit as a trio. And it took us everywhere... Japan, Australia, Europe, all through North America. However, the real story on that tour was the explosion of the bonds [between] the personalities of the three of us, Jonathan Mover, Stu Hamm and myself. To my mind, the last tour was an expression of everything the three of us knew we could do, if we were given the opportunity to do it — which was to go out with a largely instrumental set, which was pure rock and roll, and play everything that no one would ever let us play if we were hired separately. So it was the dream tour, so to speak. But Stu Hamm against Joe against Jonathan, you know, the three of us and our different personalities, wanting music to sound and be played and be developed differently, it got so tense that the last show in Phoenix, in a sold-out, 15,000 seater, was the perfect last show. It was absolutely, like, the best show we ever did, and when it was over it was like, "Wow, that's it. There's not one drop left in this band."

Now, by what criteria do you judge that?

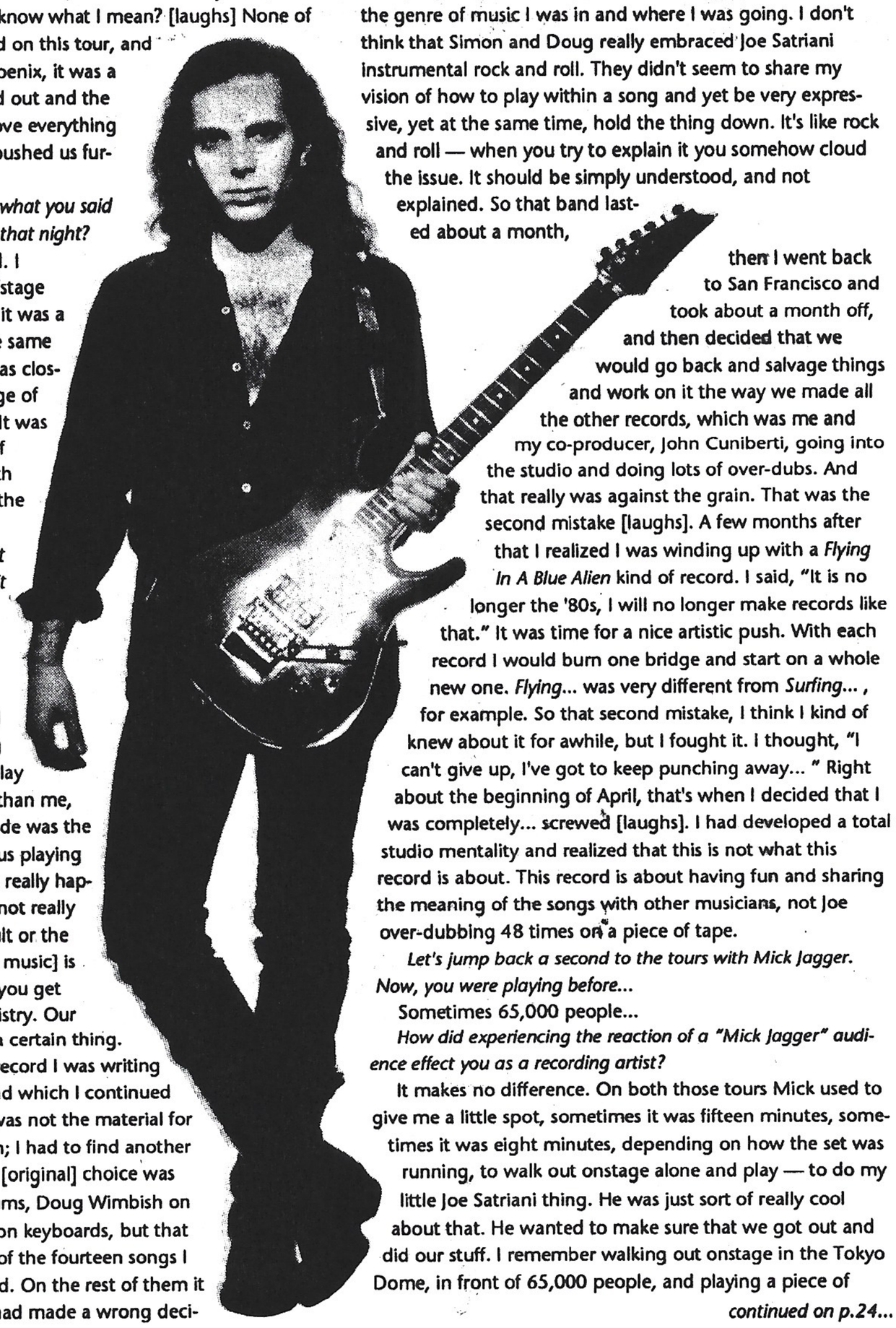
Well, everybody seemed to play with great inspiration. And, you know, when you have a show that's based on inspiration and improvisation, it's really difficult to even get one guy to be really great. It's a rough thing. It's not like a rehearsed, choreographed show where you go out and say, "Yeah, I go to the X, the lighting guy hits the spot, and it's a great show." In our case a great show was when at least one of us, or maybe more than one of us, had a good night... but if all three of us had a good night, then it was a magical thing. The magic was onstage between the three of us and the audience got to see what they don't get to see with other bands. That's what was good [about the tour]. And nothing went wrong: nobody fell off a lighting truss, nothing was stolen, no strings were broken, there weren't any riots, no one was killed — you know what I mean? [laughs] None of those things happened on this tour, and as for that night in Phoenix, it was a great show, it was sold out and the audience seemed to love everything we did — which just pushed us further and further.

Can you remember what you said after you left the stage that night?

I was overwhelmed. I remember walking offstage and just thinking that it was a great show, but at the same time, I knew a door was closing. It was the last page of the book, you know? It was a necessary cutting-off point — sort of a death and rebirth period at the same time.

Did the way you felt about that tour make it hard for you to begin working on The Extremist?

No. They weren't really related. Stu and Jonathan are amazing musicians: they can play a lot of things better than me, and the music we made was the result of the three of us playing together. That's what really happens with bands: it's not really the guitar player's fault or the drummer's fault, [the music] is what happens when you get together — it's chemistry. Our chemistry produced a certain thing. And I knew that the record I was writing while on the road, and which I continued to write afterwards, was not the material for me, Stu and Jonathan; I had to find another group of people. My [original] choice was Simon Phillips on drums, Doug Wimbish on bass and Phil Ashley on keyboards, but that only worked on two of the fourteen songs I had decided to record. On the rest of them it was a total failure. I had made a wrong decision. I invited the wrong people to the party.



Why didn't it work?

If I knew that, I wouldn't have done it [laughs]. I have no idea why it didn't work, it just seemed like that unit would be a lot of fun. We had done two tours with Mick Jagger, in 1988, and we played every kind of music in rehearsal and the shows were great — they're the kind of musicians who function really well on the edge. But, looking back from a distance, I can say it didn't work because only Phil understood the genre of music I was in and where I was going. I don't think that Simon and Doug really embraced Joe Satriani instrumental rock and roll. They didn't seem to share my vision of how to play within a song and yet be very expressive, yet at the same time, hold the thing down. It's like rock and roll — when you try to explain it you somehow cloud the issue. It should be simply understood, and not explained. So that band lasted about a month, then I went back to San Francisco and took about a month off, and then decided that we would go back and salvage things and work on it the way we made all the other records, which was me and my co-producer, John Cuniberti, going into the studio and doing lots of over-dubs. And that really was against the grain. That was the second mistake [laughs]. A few months after that I realized I was winding up with a *Flying In A Blue Alien* kind of record. I said, "It is no longer the '80s, I will no longer make records like that." It was time for a nice artistic push. With each record I would burn one bridge and start on a whole new one. *Flying...* was very different from *Surfing...* , for example. So that second mistake, I think I kind of knew about it for awhile, but I fought it. I thought, "I can't give up, I've got to keep punching away... " Right about the beginning of April, that's when I decided that I was completely... screwed [laughs]. I had developed a total studio mentality and realized that this is not what this record is about. This record is about having fun and sharing the meaning of the songs with other musicians, not Joe over-dubbing 48 times on a piece of tape.

Let's jump back a second to the tours with Mick Jagger. Now, you were playing before...

Sometimes 65,000 people...

How did experiencing the reaction of a "Mick Jagger" audience effect you as a recording artist?

It makes no difference. On both those tours Mick used to give me a little spot, sometimes it was fifteen minutes, sometimes it was eight minutes, depending on how the set was running, to walk out onstage alone and play — to do my little Joe Satriani thing. He was just sort of really cool about that. He wanted to make sure that we got out and did our stuff. I remember walking out onstage in the Tokyo Dome, in front of 65,000 people, and playing a piece of

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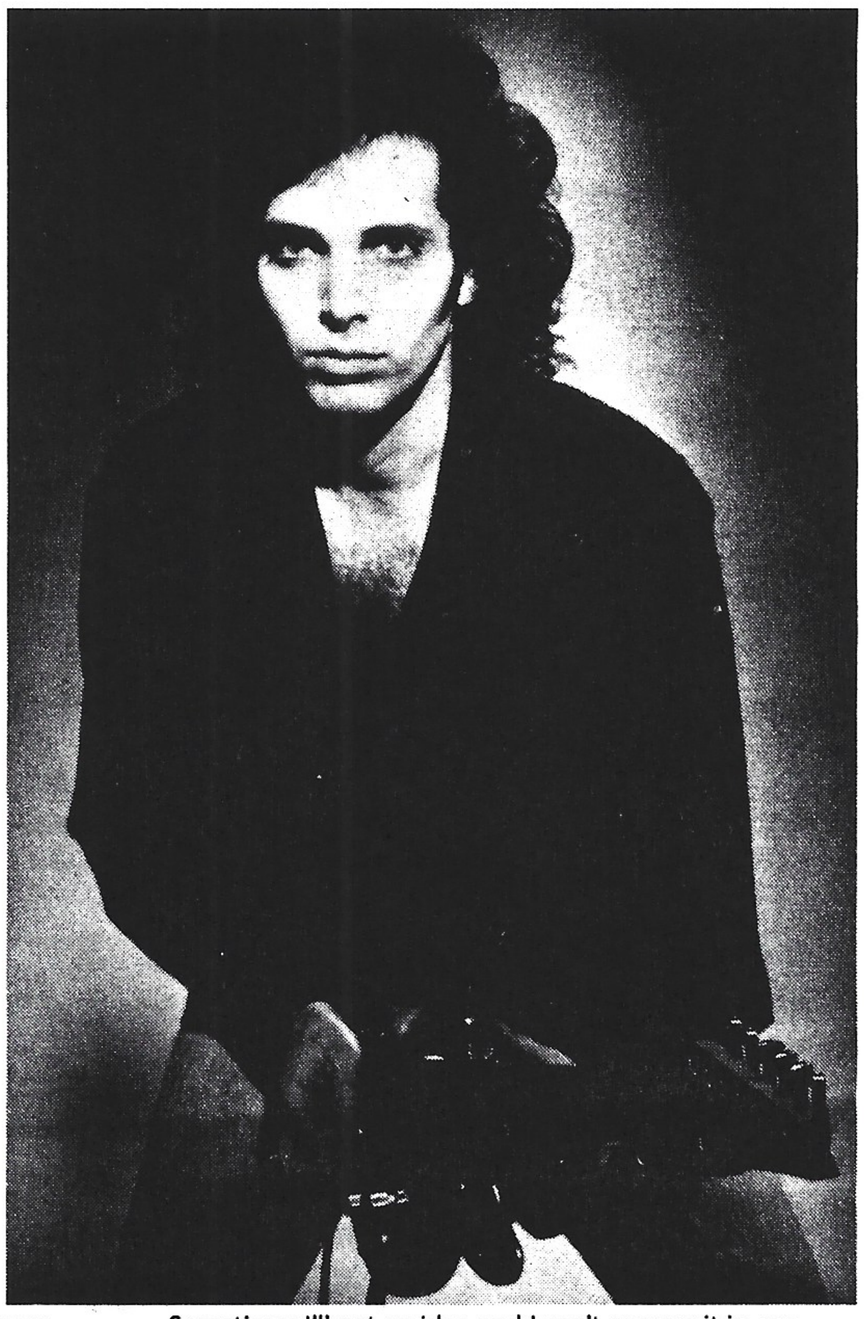
JOE SATRIANI

"I DON'T LIVE THE LIFE OF THE 'GUITAR HERO.' I MEAN, OTHER THAN DOING INTERVIEWS AND STUFF LIKE THAT. I DON'T KNOW WHAT A GUITAR HERO DOES."



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music off *Surfin' With The Alien* and the feeling I got from that was the same feeling I got at the Bottom Line, except here in New York City you can hear people say [adopts a Brooklyn accent], "Jo... ey, hey." [laughs] So there wasn't really much of a difference at all to me.

Did it make you hunger for that kind of huge success for yourself?

I don't think so. My concern always with the instrumental stuff is that it get heard. The problem when you're in a Tokyo Dome is that when you're doing, say, "Bells Of Lal II" from the *Flying...* record, I can't imagine that 90% of the people in that stadium can actually hear what you're playing. That song contains so many notes at such a high velocity, how can it possibly make sense in seat number 3400? The acoustics are horrible in a place like that. But when you go like, [does a Pete Townshend windmill] "Brrrrang!" They go, "Alright!!!" [laughs] That translates, all the way back. That's a very different style from what I've been trying to do. We've always tried to do two or three shows at a smaller venue, as opposed to "let's go for the big one." Because ultimately, if it doesn't sound good, then the experience for the fans is kind of worthless.

Did exposure to Jagger on a regular basis influence you as a performer?

I didn't feel any different, but Stu and Jonathan told me they noticed a difference. You see, it became everyday for me to walk out with an 11-piece band and be next to Mick Jagger, who'd be pushing me around the stage, choking me, doing all the weird things he used to do just to have fun onstage, and I had to get used to it because I had to perform — while being in awe of who I was onstage with at the same time. And I suppose maybe after that first tour, when I went back and we did our little club tour — cause I was doing the Jagger tour, the Satch tour, the Jagger tour, I was jumping back and forth — that I might have adapted to that. The guys said that I appeared to be more confident and project more. I was completely unaware of it. I can't take credit for it [laughs].

Getting back to The Extremist, *you've already talked about the mistakes you made while putting it together; when did it start to go right?*

Well, there was a period in there when I started working on putting together a four-piece band with a lead singer with people from Epic Records, and we used the opportunity of, sort of, grinding to a halt on *The Extremist*, to switch into this other project. Epic and Relativity had come to an agreement to let me do this record... but we never found a singer. And six months later, everybody was saying, "Gee, what's going to happen?" "We've got nothing now." So they came to me and said, "We've all agreed that if you feel like it, you can go back to working on *The Extremist*. How do you feel?" And by then I was like, "I think I know what I did wrong, and I think I want to start up again." The big decision was, I needed to find another co-producer, because I felt that John and I had gone as far as we could go. This material was looking for something else. I eventually hooked up with Andy Johns because I was looking for passion and heart and soul, blood and sweat and tears — I wanted to have a real experience in the studio, and I wanted the tape to be a recording of people playing songs, you know what I mean? Where you could hear people playing and you could hear the expressions of everyone, the high-hat, the E-string on the bass guitar, the organ part... that it wasn't just Joe; these songs needed everybody. Technically I didn't know how to do that, because John and I had always tried to amplify what it was like to be in a studio. This time I wanted ambiance. After I hooked up with Andy, I went looking for a rhythm section and came across Greg and Matt Bissonette, and they were like, instantly perfect. The funny thing was, for studied musicians — guys who can play most anything, and who can read and write and sing — they were really loose and they knew how to sound ragged and naturally... sloppy. I guess that's the word. Sloppy sounds like it's got a negative vibe to it [laughs], but they just have a way of embracing an idea in a general sense and then saying, "Okay, let's play with it." They seemed to understand what my genre was, and so when they started to play around with a song, they were doing it in the way I would if I was sitting at home, trying to reinterpret my own stuff. So it was like, "Andy, let's just go in and record this and then just pick the best one." And that's basically what we did.

What does the order that you wrote these songs in a say about what you were going through as a musician during this time?

Ooh [lifts my copy of *The Extremist* CD off the coffee table in front of us, looks over the song titles]. Each one of these songs has a funny history. "Friends" I wrote in 1988, in-between road trips; I remember the day I did it because my sister and my mom were visiting, and they went out to lunch without me because I told them I had an idea I wanted to work on. I really didn't, but I just had a feeling that a song was about to be written, and usually when that comes, I obey [laughs]. When the muse comes, right? So I had this book of photographs of people from around the world, and there was a page that featured these really cute little kids holding onto each other. They looked like they were friends. So I just focused on that when I wrote this song in a few minutes on bass guitar, and then I worked on it [begins to laugh] for the next three of four years, trying to figure out how to record it. "The Extremist" was originally called "Living On The Edge," and the main premise of the song was written — and you're going to die when you hear this — during the *Flying In A Blue Dream* project for a Levi's commercial. Someone had called up and said, "These guys want a real heavy riff and they just want 30 seconds or 60 seconds or something." I really didn't want to do it, but the professional side of me said, "You're a professional musician, this is what musicians do, they write music." So I did this thing, we recorded it late one night, and I remember when it was finished I said, "This is really great, how could I ever send this for a screwy commercial?" But I sent it out anyway and sort of held my breath and luckily they sent it back, saying, "Well, it's really great, but it's too heavy." So I said, "Thank you very much. Give me that back." [laughs] And I worked on that for quite a few years because it was just the riff basically, and part of the verse, but from that I saw the future. I said at the time, "This is the future of my music. This is where it should be going." But it took a couple of years before I knew what to do with the rest of the song. I had three other minutes I had to write [laughs].

Have you ever been in a situation, during the writing process, where you can verbalize an idea and still not be able to grasp it musically?

Sometimes I'll get an idea and I can't express it in any way. A lot of the instrumentals exist because the music is better than any words I could come up with, or because this is the only way that particular idea can exist — there are no words to express it. But, definitely, on material that takes a couple of years to write, I know what I want, but I just can't complete it. On the *Surfin'* record there's a tune called "Lords Of Karma," which I started writing 18 years ago; I think that's the longest time I ever spent working on a song [laughs]. I had the first two chords that represented the basis of the song, but I was unable to write anything around it. It wasn't until a few weeks before recording *Surfin' With The Alien* that I finally figured out the rest of the song.

The Extremist *also features some of your most tender guitar work. What made you decide to pursue that direction?*

Because we focused on recording songs that seemed to relate to each other in less obvious ways. To me, "Rubina's Blue Sky Happiness" has the same spirit as "Friends," "War" and "New Blues," although they're very different in style. To me, it still sounds like me and a bunch of musicians playing music, there's a spirit and an attitude and it unifies the whole record. And I'm really happy with the way that the record got sequenced and the way we were able to blend it all together — that's the hardest thing. When we did *Flying In A Blue Dream*, we worked on the sequencing for three months, trying to figure out, "How are we going to get these songs to go together?" And I'm not quite sure we got it right [laughs], because that record really had some strange gear shifts in it. This one is an organic record — it's very deep and wide sounding, it brings you way into a whole sound and place.

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It's not a cold display of audacious guitar and a bass and drums.

What do you do to keep all this from being too much. I mean, what do you do in your "real life" to put the "guitar hero" mantle aside?

Well, I don't live the life of the "guitar hero." I mean, other than doing interviews and stuff like that. I don't know what a guitar hero does [laughs]. The guitar heroes that I've met are all interesting, exciting people, but they're not that caricature. Eddie Van Halen isn't like that, Steve Vai isn't like that, these guys are dedicated musicians, they love to play, they'd do anything to play guitar and have fun... they have families. I suppose when I meet them we're sort of in an unofficial guitar player's club, you know? There's sort of a relaxed attitude towards each other and an interest in what each of us is doing, but I don't know, that guitar hero thing is applied from the outside. My main concern is, am I going to write a great song today? Can I play as good today as I played yesterday? That's what I think on a day-to-day level as far as being a musician is concerned. I have to maintain my technique and I have to maintain an attitude to stay creative, or to be receptive to inspiration. So you've got to keep yourself in mental, or maybe it's spiritual, shape, to constantly live on that edge of always being musical.

But is music it? I mean, what else do you do for fun?

I do a lot of things. I think I do just about what everybody else does. I like to water ski, I like to trek through the mountains, I like to swim, I go to the movies, I like to ride bikes, I like to drive fast cars [laughs], you know? I like to be with friends, I like to just hang out with friends and play music really loud and maybe go out and have a few beers. That's pretty much it. I don't have any unusual hobbies — I'm not into skydiving or bungee jumping or fencing...

What do you remember from when the guitar was a hard thing for you to play?

JOE SATRIANI

"I REMEMBER LISTENING TO THE RADIO AND NOT KNOWING WHAT THE HELL WAS GOING ON, AND SAYING TO MYSELF, 'JOE, YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT CHORD THAT IS. YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT RHYTHMS THOSE ARE. YOU ARE COMPLETELY LOST. YOU ARE AN IDIOT.'"

Guitar playing is still hard for me, without a doubt. It's all relative. To answer your question specifically, yeah, I remember listening to the radio and not knowing what the hell was going on, and saying to myself, "Joe, you don't know what chord that is. You don't know what rhythms those are. You are completely lost [laughs]. You are an idiot." And I can remember feeling very frustrated that I had this desire to grow, but I had no way of recognizing music so that I could use it myself. I mean, you're talking to a guy who spent 15 hours a day practicing, for years, trying to overcome physical boundaries that I will never overcome, but that I will never stop trying to overcome. It's like being an athlete, you're constantly working against your anatomy, and you try to find your strong points and you try to weasel your way around your weak points and be careful, don't hurt yourself, but make sure that all that you've got is going to serve the ultimate goal. That's something that's ongoing. Back when I was just trying to get from a C to a G chord, it was all I could do to get there. Now I have no problem going from C to G, but what I'm trying to do is, make [a track like] "War," and make people tremble and think and go through soul-searching. The technique involved in recording a song like that is mind-boggling. But, you know, the feeling is almost the same. Because I can play C to G, I don't think about it. My problems are just accelerated. In relative terms, it's still the same thing.

Do you ever feel bad for the kid that's sitting at home and trying to figure out what you're playing on the records?

Yeah, because I can relate [to them]. I was that person. When I listen to some other people sometimes — when I listen to John Coltrane I'm still like, "Wow, where is that coming from." Or Jimi Hendrix, you know, just for the honesty and truth of the inspiration. It's amazing. I was a teacher for many years, and I used to take on lots of students who were just beginners, eight-year-old kids and stuff, and I spent a lot of time trying to let them know that it was okay to be a beginner; that, in effect, at that stage, you're blessed with not knowing how crummy you really are. If I had the ears I have now when I was thirteen, fourteen-years-old and I really heard what I sounded like, I never would have continued. But my ears weren't very perceptive back then, so I couldn't tell that I was completely out of tune and that I was missing notes left and right. I was oblivious to it. I was just having such a great time playing guitar. Being a beginner is a rare opportunity to experience music in a way that will only be that way for a short amount of time, because you grow up, everybody grows up, and your ears get smart. When you're a beginner you're blessed with not knowing what you sound like, so anything goes. ●

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